ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT AVIAN FLU

Last updated April 25, 2006

What is avian influenza?

Avian influenza is an infection caused by avian influenza (or "bird flu") viruses. These flu viruses occur naturally among birds. Wild birds worldwide commonly carry the viruses in their intestines or respiratory tracts but usually do not get sick from them. However, bird flu can be contagious among birds and can make some wild and domesticated birds including chickens, ducks, and turkeys – very sick and kill them.

Where is this flu found?

Outbreaks of a strain of avian influenza have occurred recently among poultry in a number of countries in Asia, Europe and Africa. Human infections of a strain of avian flu have been reported in Azerbaijan, Cambodia, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Thailand, Turkey and Vietnam.

Can avian flu infect humans?

Avian flu viruses do not usually infect humans. However, several cases of human infection with avian flu viruses have occurred. Since 2003, about 200 humans have been infected with avian flu. While it is unusual for people to get influenza infections directly from animals, sporadic human infections and outbreaks caused by certain avian influenza viruses and pig influenza viruses have been reported. These sporadic human infections and outbreaks, however, rarely result in sustained transmission among humans.

If I get a flu shot, am I protected against avian flu?

The annual influenza vaccine many people receive cannot prevent avian flu as the vaccine was meant for a different strain of influenza found in and transmitted among humans. But, we encourage the public to get vaccinated against the flu. Getting vaccinated against seasonal flu is an important part of maintaining good body resistance and staying healthy overall. We also encourage the public to adopt healthy habits to prevent the incidence and spread of germs and the influenza virus.

Why is there so much concern about avian influenza?

The presence of even a limited number of human cases of avian flu in the population and the continual mutation of the virus have raised concerns that the current situation could lead to a pandemic – a global outbreak of disease – if the virus develops the ability to spread from human-to-human. Currently, the virus does not have that capability and can only be spread effectively from bird-to-bird and from bird-to-human. Estimates taken from the 1918 pandemic show that a mutation of the avian flu virus resulting in a human-to-human transmissible strain could result in two million deaths worldwide.

What is the government doing to protect the public from exposure to avian flu?

Numerous U.S. government agencies, together with other non-governmental organizations both domestically and internationally, have taken and continue to take action in a number of areas to protect U.S. citizens from avian flu exposure and spread. Activities include:

- The U.S. government currently has a pandemic influenza response plan. This plan is well developed and is changed in response to the latest information and research that comes available. The National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza is available for viewing by visiting *www.pandemicflu.gov*.

- Vaccine production and procurement.
- Creating a national antiviral stockpile for use against influenza pandemic. The national antiviral stockpile will be used to treat identified priority groups agreed upon by a national expert committee.
- Managing a national stockpile of personal protective equipment and emergency supplies. The stockpile contains everything from beds and blankets to a supply of pharmaceuticals. This includes a stockpile of antiviral medication.
- Providing international leadership on pandemic preparedness.
- Conducting ongoing agricultural and wild life surveillance to detect cases or carriers of avian influenza before it causes human infections.
- Conducting ongoing medical surveillance to detect cases and clusters of severe or emerging respiratory infections and to effectively prevent and contain their spread.

Should I be worried about catching avian flu?

Avian flu currently does not have the ability to be transmitted through human-to-human contact. However, close, sustained contact with infected birds can cause humans to become infected. Travelers to areas with identified outbreaks of avian flu are encouraged to take the necessary precautions to prevent the contraction and spread of this disease.

How is the avian flu contracted and spread?

Avian flu is spread through contact with the avian flu virus, found in the saliva, nasal secretions, blood, muscle and feces of infected birds. It is believed that most cases of bird flu infection in humans have resulted from contact with infected poultry or contaminated surfaces. Most of the proven cases have occurred following prolonged and close contact with infected poultry.

How do humans usually get avian flu?

Most cases of avian flu infection in humans have resulted from contact with infected poultry or contaminated surfaces. To date, human infections with avian influenza viruses detected since 1997 have not resulted in sustained human-to-human transmission. However, because influenza viruses have the potential to change and gain the ability to spread easily between people, monitoring for human infection and person-to-person transmission is important.

What can the average person do to protect himself or herself from the avian flu?

Travelers to affected areas are advised to avoid contact with birds and poultry, and avoid going to bird parks, poultry markets and farms. Avoid touching birds and poultry, especially ill or dead birds, which may carry the avian flu virus. If you have been in contact with birds or poultry, immediately wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water or waterless alcohol-based hand-rubs or sanitizer. Observe food hygiene and eat only poultry and eggs that have been thoroughly cooked and from approved sources.

Finally, the best protection against all strains of influenza is building and maintaining good body resistance. This can be achieved through a balanced diet, regular exercise, adequate rest, good personal hygiene, adequate indoor ventilation and not smoking. As with any disease spread from a respiratory route, wash your hands, cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze and Avoid crowded places with poor ventilation.

Are any Americans infected?

No, there have been no human cases of avian flu identified in the United States and, to date, no Americans have been found to have been infected abroad. The current risk to Americans from the avian flu outbreak

in Asia, Europe and Africa is low. Avian flu is not currently found in the United States. Since February 2004, medical and public health personnel have been watching closely to find any such cases.

Will the current form of avian flu evolve into a pandemic strain that could spread to America?

We don't know for sure whether the current strains of avian flu will evolve into a pandemic strain. However, it has shown the ability to mutate or change so it is a concern. Influenza viruses are constantly changing over time and it is possible that changes in the virus currently affecting poultry and humans in Southeast Asia can result in a virus that is more transmissible to and among humans. While there have been changes in the virus over time, there is currently no indication that the virus has changed to a form that could result in a pandemic. This possibility is being closely monitored by numerous health organizations around the world.

Is there an effective vaccine for avian flu?

There is not currently an effective or approved vaccine to prevent avian flu in humans.

In order to gain immunity from avian flu individuals will need to receive two doses of an avian flu vaccine. The first dose will need to be a close match to the actual virus causing the pandemic. The second dose will actually have to based on the true pandemic strain of virus. The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), part of the National Institutes of Health, has awarded two contracts to support the production and clinical testing of an investigational vaccine based on two strains of avian influenza, H5N1, which might have the potential to cause pandemic influenza. A limited supply of one of these vaccines has already been produced .If a pandemic of H5N1 avian influenza were to occur in humans, this vaccine might be effective for the first dose for a limited number of people. After the emergence of a pandemic it will be at least 6 months before a specific vaccine is available that can be used for both the first and second dose. The delay is due to the need to make a vaccine that will specifically protect you from the virus that is causing the pandemic. Before the pandemic strikes, there is no way to tell what the particular strain of virus will be.

Research studies to test a vaccine to protect humans against the H5N1 avian flu virus began in April 2005.

How should US citizens traveling in high-risk countries protect themselves from avian flu?

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) currently advises that travelers to countries in Asia with known outbreaks of avian influenza avoid poultry farms, contact with animals in live food markets, and any surfaces that appear to be contaminated with feces from poultry or other animals. The CDC advises travelers to clean their hands often with soap and water or waterless alcohol-based hand-rubs to help prevent disease transmission. In addition, as a precaution, all foods from poultry, including eggs, should be thoroughly cooked. The CDC further advises any travelers with a febrile respiratory illness returning from countries with avian flue outbreaks to seek prompt medical attention.